An Introduction to Metaethics

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Objectives

After reading this chapter, the student should be able to:

1. Describe the nature of metaethical inquires;
2. State and explain the different issues and problems in metaethics;
3. Identify various metaethical positions that answer particular problems.

Introduction

Metaethics is a philosophical inquiry into the metaphysical-cum-semantic and epistemological-cum-logical commitments and presuppositions of our moral judgments. In this chapter, we will explore some of the questions that baffled many metaethicists since time immemorial.

Metaethics and its place in Philosophy

Metaethics overlaps, to a large extent, with different branches of philosophy. It overlaps with metaphysics, the study of reality, in that it inquires about the nature and existence of the objective bearers of moral judgments. It also overlaps with epistemology, the study of knowledge and justification, in that it examines the justifications and rational grounds of moral judgments. Finally, it overlaps with philosophy of language, the study of the nature of linguistic phenomenon, in that it looks at how moral concepts—like good and bad—acquire their meaning.

In the general scheme of philosophy, we should note that metaethics is part of moral philosophy. Moral philosophy or ethics is a branch of philosophy that deals with the ultimate questions of morality. There are two sorts of questions that moral philosophy tries to tackle:

1. What is the nature and methodology of moral judgments?
2. What principles ought we to live by?[2]

To ask the first question is do metaethics; while to ask the second is to do normative ethics.

Normative ethics studies the principles about how we ought to live; it looks for norms about what is right or wrong, virtuous, worthwhile, or just. Alternatively, it includes nontautologous claims about what is morally right, what is morally good, and what morally ought to be done.[3] Normative ethical claims are usually backed up by some normative

[1] This is a revised version of my "Moral Talk Exposed: An Introduction to the Problems of Metaethics," published 2008, *The Philosophical Landscape 5th edition*, C&E Publishing Inc.

[2] See Gensler (1998, 4-5).

[3] Sinnott-Armstrong (1996, 4).

theory. For example, to claim that lying is morally wrong in all cases implies a normative theory that tells us that there are no excusable cases of lying.

Metaethics, on the other hand, inquires about the nature and methodology of moral judgments. Metaethics is not concerned with which actions are right or wrong, or good or bad. Rather, it is concerned with whether actions, institutions, people, situations and many more things are right and wrong, good and bad, in the first place.[4] This highlights then a concerne in metaethics: i.e. it is concerned with the meaning and use of moral concepts in moral judgments.

Three Metaethical Problems

There are three important philosophical questions asked in metaethics and each implies a particular point of inquiry.[5] The three questions are as follows:

1. Are there such things as moral facts and properties?
2. Are moral judgments truth-evaluable?
3. How are moral judgments justified?

The first question is a question in moral ontology. Moral ontology deals with the underlying metaphysical commitments of moral judgments. Specifically, it inquires into the ontological status of moral facts and properties presupposed in many moral judgments.

The main question in moral ontology is whether there are such things as moral facts or properties akin to trees, people, buildings et al.[6] It seems that we have been complacent with how we use words like "good" and "right" in our moral discourses. It is like we have the habit of attributing goodness or rightness to any human action, policy, et al. as though we understand what we are talking about. Consider this. We say, "Cheating is not good." But what do we mean here? Are we saying that 'goodness' is not an attribute of 'cheating'? But what does this entail? Are we in fact saying that there is a thing such as 'goodness'? If we believe that there is such a thing, where is it then? Contrariwise, if we do not believe that there is such a thing as 'goodness', what do we mean then when we say, "Cheating is not good"? These questions, some would say, are beside the point—or, what is worse, miss the point. But, if we are to assert that something is good (or bad) or right (or wrong), we must answer first the question, "What makes them right or wrong in the first place?"

The second question is a question in moral epistemology. Moral epistemology deals with the question whether moral claims can be judged as true or false. This has its affinities with moral psychology, which asks whether moral claims are expressions of belief or attitudes (emotions). These two questions are one and the same, for to express a belief about what one thinks as morally good or right is to ask whether or not it is true that they are. Contrary to this is when we see moral claims as mere expressions of attitudes. If moral claims were mere expressions of attitudes, then there would be no way to judge them as

[4] See Fisher and Kirchin (2006, 2).

[5] Some philosophers contest this. Hare (1985) (2000) claims that there is only one main question in metaethics; Sinnott-Armstrong (1996) claims that there are four.

[6] This question is of historical importance in the development of moral philosophy because it triggered the move from dormant, and often dogmatic, normative moralizing to an active philosophical discourse about ethics.

true or false. In effect, these two issues can be rendered as the problem concerning our knowledge of moral claims. It is important to deal with this question because it exposes how we use moral words or concepts in our moral claims. Our answer to the epistemological question will show how we treat our moral claims.

The third question is a question about moral reasoning. Moral reasoning deals with the question of whether or not we can derive a moral claim from a set of factual claims. Of the three problems, this has a direct and important consequence to our moral lives.

This problem comes from a famous 'law' concerning moral claims. This is referred to as Hume's Law, after the Scottish philosopher David Hume. In his *Treatise* (Book III, part ii, § I), Hume states the following:

> In every system of morality which I have hitherto met with, I have always remarked, that the author proceeds for some time in the ordinary way of reasoning, and establishes the being of a God, or makes observations concerning human affairs; when of a sudden I am surprised to find, that instead of the usual copulations of propositions, *is*, and *is not*, I meet with no proposition that is not connected with an *ought*, or an *ought not*. This charge is imperceptible; but *is*, however, of the last consequence. For as this *ought*, or *ought not*, expresses some new relation of affirmation, it is necessary that it should be observed and explained; and at the same time that a reason should be given, for what seems altogether inconceivable, how this new relation can be a deduction from others, which are entirely different from it.

We could sum up what he is saying by a familiar phrase in the philosophical jargon: "You can never derive an *ought*-statement from an *is*-statement." Let us illustrate what this implies: Given our data about fetal development, i.e. we know the whole history of an unborn child, from its conception to its fetal phase; we cannot derive from this the moral claim, "It is morally wrong to abort (kill) an unborn child." Why is this? The typical explanation is that moral conclusions cannot be drawn validly from non-moral premises, unless there is at least one moral premise present in the argument. Although we must admit, that *some* forms of argument would permit such a derivation: e.g. from "All Greeks are men" we could arrive at the conclusion, "If it is morally wrong to eat men, then it is morally wrong to eat Greeks."[4] But the *real* problem with moral reasoning is not as trivial as this.

The three problems are related with each other. Whatever may be the answer to the first would affect the second and third questions. For example, if we claim that we there are moral facts, we are also committed to the position that we can judge moral claims as true or false. And if we are to say that moral claims are factual claims, then we are committed to idea that we can derive an 'ought' from an 'is' since it follows that, for this claim, 'oughts' are really 'ises' in the first place.

How are these questions important to our moral lives? By answering these metaethical questions, we will have a sense of what we are doing when we are engaged in moral talk. We now realize the importance of what we are committing into when we declare that something is good or right. But what is of more importance is to understand, as I think most of contemporary moral philosophers would agree, is that metaethical issues have

concrete implications of how we make policies and decisions critical to sustain a well-rounded life, and this where moral reasoning is relevant.

In the next three sections, we will be discussing different answers to the three problems raised above. We will be exposed to different positions and arguments developed by different schools of thought that dominated the discussion of metaethical problems since the early part of the 20th century.

Moral Ontology

We have discussed what moral ontology is all about in the last section; now let us see what are the different positions that were given to answer the question, "Do moral facts and properties exist?"

An affirmative answer to this question implies moral realism. Moral realism purports that there are moral facts and properties.

> …[I]t means the view that moral qualities such as wrongness, and likewise moral facts such as the fact that an act was wrong, exist *in rerum natura*[5], so that, if one says that a certain act was wrong, one is saying that there existed, somehow, this quality of wrongness, and that it had to exist *there* if that act were to be wrong. Hare (1985, 40-41).

If we believe that there are moral facts, then we believe that there exists such a thing as the quality of being good or bad (or right or wrong). But the term 'exists' here is open to criticism. For one, when we claim that "Being good exists," is it the same as claiming that "Trees exist"? Let us grant that 'exists' mean the same thing in both statements. Are there any good grounds to suppose that moral realism is true?

One plausible argument for moral realism is as follows:

> Someone might begin by pointing to our normal everyday language and practices and claim that they reflect the idea that such properties exist. Just as we might say, "That person's hair is brown," we might say, "That person is wicked." We seem to be doing the same thing in both cases, namely ascribing properties to things. We ascribe properties with our language, and this includes moral language. As such, it makes sense to think that, in some fashion, moral properties exist. Fisher and Kirchin (2006, 3)

This argument is often called the semantic argument. It relies on two specific premises:

1. We ascribe properties using language.
2. This ascription implies that such properties exist.

From the first, we could infer that our capacity to predicate certain qualities to certain objects is done using our language. And from the second, we could infer that because we can do this, we could suppose that these qualities exist. By having the capacity of using language to ascribe properties to objects we are in turn making a statement about the

relationship between the object and its properties as they exist in the world. We could infer that this relationship is a fact. Now, if we grant this, it would lead us to the conclusion that there are moral facts. But is this a good argument for moral realism.

On the face of it, we could say that it is not. Some words have meaning not because they represent something in the world. Consider the word, "Santa Claus." It is meaningful to utter the sentence, "Santa Claus has a beard," without implying that there is such a thing as Santa Claus. As such, though it is true that we have moral worlds like "good" and "bad," but this does not mean that they refer to real properties in the world. If this is so, then the argument would not secure the claim of moral realism.

Another problem for moral realists is the possibility of defining moral properties in terms of non-moral ones. If moral properties—like being good—are definable in terms of non-moral properties—like defining an action's goodness in terms of its benefit—then the existence of moral properties could be explained in terms of the existence of non-moral ones. Hence, moral properties do not exist. But are moral properties definable using non-moral properties in the first place? If they are not, then it would be case for moral realism.[7]

Some metaethicists claim that moral properties are indeed definable in terms of non-moral properties. They are called moral naturalists. One important thing to note about moral naturalism is how it uses the term 'definable.' In ordinary discourse, to say that one word is definable to other is to say that we could substitute the other word for the original word without distorting its meaning (in Latin this is called *salva veritate*). This, in fact, could be expressed in non-neutral terms as a 'reduction'. Reduction in this sense becomes a technical term whereby we state that the original word is a convenient locution for what is shown to be the case. So if moral naturalism espouses the idea that moral concepts are definable, they are also committed to the idea that moral properties are reducible to non-moral ones.

Naturalism's projected reduction of moral properties might be thought of as pertaining only to a reduction to *natural* non-moral properties, i.e. properties that are expressible using scientific jargon. Perhaps, we can imagine reducing the moral concept 'good' to the X-neuron firings in the brain in the sixth genome mutation. However, we must not confine ourselves solely to such non-moral properties. To generalize the idea: a non-moral property can be any property that does not use moral concepts as part of that property.

With this generalized version of naturalism, we can have different varieties of reduction. One prevailing position is the idea of supernaturalism. Supernaturalism is the idea that the moral property being good is definable as 'following the will of God'.[7] Utilitarianism, another form of naturalism, characterizes the goodness of an action as the property of that action that promotes the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people.

It is important to note here that the scientific, supernaturalistic, and utilitarianistic reductions purport that there can be an objective way to settle the definability of moral properties. That is, there is a unique decision procedure by which we can define moral

[7] Frank Jackson, however, argues a contrary point: moral properties exist precisely because they supervene on non-moral properties. See Simon and Kirchin (2006).

properties. Either we look at moral properties as a composite of our biological structure, or as the will of God, or as the promotion of the greatest happiness for the greatest number. Moral naturalists who believe in this are committed to the idea of moral objectivism.

Contrary to this position, other naturalists believe that there is no objective way of reducing moral properties to non-moral ones. Two particular positions are relevant here. The first is moral subjectivism. Moral subjectivism claims that a particular action is good or right just means that 'I' *like* that particular action. Though subjectivism is an appealing position, we would not pursue this because of its close affiliations to the second position, viz. moral relativism.

Moral relativism is the view that differences in basic moral and value judgments cannot be resolved in any rational or objective way for what is 'good' is relative only to the norms of a given society, and that each of these judgments involved must be regarded as equally valid.[8] This position must be given due credit, not only because some philosophers, particularly J. L. Mackie, used this to do away with moral realism altogether, but also because, with the hard evidence from anthropological studies, this seems to be a plausible explanation for moral talk.

Relativists argue that morality arises when a group of people reaches an implicit understanding, or come to a tacit understanding, about their relations with one another.[9] Harman furthers this thesis by saying that a moral judgment could make sense only in relation to this agreement. Others argue that to talk about universal ethical principles does not make sense if we accept that there are different ethical principles adhered to by different groups of people—which in fact is proven by anthropological data.[10] For to accept this idea is to accept that the choice of the ethical principles to adhere to is made by these people. Though we seem to have a generalized concept of values, such as those that were derived from human nature and the human situation, it would not undermine the fact that the advent of morality came from the people who made the agreement themselves. It may be that this agreement is far wide spread than is normally thought of.

The philosophical appeal of moral relativism is that it dissolves many unnecessary problems in metaethics. It will deny the existence of objective moral facts. It will rest itself to the findings of empirical *social* sciences. What this position does not escape is its naturalism. And this would be subjected to a crucial attack from the other side of moral realism.

A negative answer to question, "Are moral properties definable using non-moral properties?" is moral non-naturalism. Moral non-naturalism claims that we can never define moral properties using non-moral properties. G. E. Moore, who in his breakthrough work, *Principia Ethica*, gave a counterargument against any form of moral naturalism, espoused this idea. This is what is now called the open question argument. The open question argument starts with the claim that any attempt to define the concept 'good', as naturalism does, will ultimately lead to a fallacy. This is what he termed as the naturalistic fallacy. The argument runs as follows:

[8] See Frankena and Grangose (1974, 423).
[9] See Harman (1975, 3ff).
[10] See Brandt (Frankena and Grangose, 1974, 424ff).

The correct definition of the 'good' must be a *closed* definition, i.e. it would no longer be meaningful to ask whether the defining non-moral property is good, since if it were possible, then it would not be the correct definition. Now, let us say that we use the non-moral property 'God's will' as the definition of the concept 'good'. We now ask ourselves whether the question, "Is God's will good?" meaningful. Surely, from this we can say that the question is still meaningful. Thus, we should conclude, following Moore's proposal, that this definition commits the naturalistic fallacy, and it succumbs to the open question argument.

The open question argument does not end there. Having shown that any definition of the concept 'good' commits the naturalistic fallacy, the task now for non-naturalism is to account for moral properties. Moore's answer to this is that moral properties are indefinable concepts; i.e., they are primitive ideas that we know solely through our intuitions. There is no use of defining the concept that we already have clear intuitions of. This is what is called moral intuitionism.

Many philosophers have contested Moore's results. Frankena (Fisher and Kirchin 2006, 27) objects to Moore's use of the open question argument. He claims that the open question argument is an *ad hoc* support for Moore's intuitionism, and it seems that that argument is not an argument at all. Mary Warnock (2004, 11-12) complained that Moore's position was asserted without any arguments. It is merely accepted as a dogma. Further, she claims that what the open question argument achieved was not a move towards clarity; rather, it was a move towards subjectivism, since if we were to ask whether our intuitions about morality are objective, Moore does not seems to answer.

We must concede that many later moral philosophers agreed with Frankena that Moore's open question argument was indeed not an argument at all. But rest assured the terrains of moral philosophy changed from that point on. And this change came in waves. The first wave hit when logical positivism hit the English shore.

The character of ethical questions shifted when Moore's argument came into the foray. The fashion then was that many philosophical questions about morality were really questions concerning the use of the moral language. W. D. Hudson (1970, 12), as did Hare (2000, 1), puts this clearly: a study of the meanings of our moral concepts will help clarify how we use them in our moral discourses. This project was deemed as ultimately a *neutral* analysis of morality, for, as it was seen then, no biases and personal values are present in the analysis. The first of this new wave of philosophers was A. J. Ayer.

Ayer's classic book, *Language, Truth and Logic*, gave, for the first time, the English-speaking world a glimpse of the findings of the *Vienna Circle*, the logical empiricists (positivists). There are just two tenets that we have to keep in mind. First, the meaning of a statement resides in the mode of its verification. And second, that if there were no such mode, then that statement is meaningless. Applied to the question, "Do moral properties exist?" a logical positivist would just say that there are no such things as moral properties, or that moral claims are meaningless. This is the view called moral anti-realism. When can further this position by asking, "If there are no moral facts, what then are moral claims all about?"

The answer Ayer took was emotivism. Emotivism is the position that purports that moral claims are mere expression of one's emotions. There are two types of emotivism present in the literature: philosophical emotivism and psychological emotivism. The former

was Ayer's position. The latter was C. L. Stevenson's position. Although generically similar, there is one peculiar difference between the two positions. Ayer's position is already defined above. But Stevenson's account is more complex than this.

Stevenson used the advancements made in psychology to back up his emotivism. "…The emotive meaning of a word is a tendency of a word, arising through the history of its usage, to produce (result from) *affective* responses in people."[11] This has deep affiliations with a psychological rendering of pain (being evaded by people) and pleasure (being what people seek). If we used this to moral concepts, we will arrive at the idea that we use the word 'good' to express what we feel to be positive to people. This is different from Ayer's account inasmuch as Ayer was only concerned with a single person's emotions, while Stevenson's account tried to explain why we tend to express our emotions this way rather in other ways.

J. L. Mackie gave another anti-realist account of moral ontology. I had already cited his name above in reference to relativism. Now, let us see his take on moral ontology. He believes that there are no moral properties or facts—this made him an anti-realist. But what is unique about his anti-realism is that he (1977, 15) believes moral talk is an attempt to describe the fabric of the world. However, as he later points out, there is no substantial evidence to say that there is such a thing as a moral property. He supplied two arguments for this.

The first was the argument from queerness. Here he pointed out, as Bernard Williams (1985, 203) puts it, that ontologically objective values offend parsimony (Ockham's Razor: do not multiply entities beyond necessity). To add objective values to the fabric of the world might be conceptually helpful, but would not help factual investigations. His other argument was the argument from relativity. I think we have gone through this quite exhaustively already.

From the supporting arguments, Mackie named his view moral skepticism. His skepticism derives its strength to another theory he (1977, 35) espoused, viz. the error theory. Error theory is really an epistemological position. It purports that moral judgments are always false because there are no such things as moral properties that these judgments seems to describe. The error lies in the belief that there are objective moral values.

The last of the members of the class of anti-realists is universal prescriptivism. Universal prescriptivism is the position that purports that moral claims are really recommendations of what actions can be done that everyone is capable to follow. This position was developed by. R. M. Hare. The basic ontological position of universal prescriptivism is that moral claims do not state facts; rather, they are imperatives that we desire others will follow. We will have more to say about this position in the next section.

Moral Epistemology

We have seen the ontological positions given by different metaethical theories in the last section. I think that as we went along our discussions a while ago, we have also touched some answers to the epistemological problem. As such, our discussions here will be brief.

[11] See Stevenson (1937, 2).

There are two main epistemological positions in metaethics. The first is moral cognitivism, which claims that we can judge moral claims as true or false. Now, we further our inquiry regarding this matter by posting another question, "How do we make such judgment?" As we have seen above, it seems perfectly acceptable that all moral realists are moral cognitivists, since each of them believe that moral claims are about moral properties. The only crucial point is that they differ in their assessment of the definition of moral properties.

Error theory, as espoused by Mackie, is a peculiar breed of cognitivism. It states that moral judgments are always false. This view believes that we can have a judgment of whether moral claims are true or false, but if we look at the world itself, we must admit that we don't have moral properties in them. Hence, if moral judgment is the assertion of something having a moral property, and moral properties do not exist, it follows then that our moral judgments are always false.

The last of the cognitivists are the descriptivists. Descriptivism, following Fisher and Kirchin (2006, 3), expresses a claim about the language that is typically used when people give moral judgments. The idea behind descriptivism can be traced from the problem of moral reasoning; viz. the "no ought from is" problem. This position is a response to that problem. Adherents of this position; viz. G. E. M. Anscombe, Philippa Foot, and John Searle to name a few, put moral judgments akin to factual judgments. In order to understand this, some preliminary considerations must be given for this position.

The germ of this idea can be seen in Anscombe. She argues (1958a, 71):

> In relation to many descriptions of events or states of affairs which are asserted to hold, we can ask what the "brute facts" were: and this will mean the facts which held, and in virtue of which, in a proper context, such and such a description is true or false.

Concerning moral judgments this entails that in a proper context they can be seen as descriptions supported by brute facts. In order to understand what this means we need to see the distinction between "facts seen in a proper context" and "brute facts". Our guide to this will be Searle (1977, 50ff). He defines a brute fact as fact that constitutes the knowledge of the world. Examples of these can be seen all around us: the stone beneath our feet, a dog barking, leaves falling from trees, etc. What Anscombe meant by in a proper context can be seen in a better way by what Searle refers to as an "institutional fact". Institutional facts presuppose the existence of human institutions, which, in turn, lay the system of constitutive rules that make certain statements descriptions of such facts. Money is the best example of this. Without government institutions and banking systems that gave money its value, a piece of paper money will remain a plain paper. Let us now see what this implies to moral judgments.

A moral judgment can be seen as a description of a state of affairs in light of certain facts (whether brute or institutional). To say that, "I owe a person some money" is to say that under the brute fact that I asked a person to hand me some paper (which is institutionally proclaimed to have value), and that we had an agreement that I would give back the same value to him at a specific time, then the statement is said to be true. Anscombe and Searle are clear about the idea that we can never enumerate all the facts that

would make a description true. But, it is also clear that because of the institutional facts we could see what the description implicitly implies.

Foot gives a different view of how descriptions may be relevant to moral judgments. She argues (1958) that making a moral judgment involves two considerations: first, there must be evidence for them; and second, contrary evidence must be disposed of. Foot's route to descriptivism is different from Anscombe's and Searle's inasmuch as she (1958, 503) uses descriptions (or factual statements) in relation to moral claims not as mere judgments used to entail them (moral claims); rather, they are seen as evidence for them (moral claims). That is, the relationship between factual claims and moral claims is not an inferential one; rather, their relationship is an evidential one. Her argument for her position is simple. She says (1958, 506), concerning what is meant by the term "rude":

> …the meaning of "rude" is given by the attitude it expresses. The answer is that if "thinking a thing rude" is to be described as having a particular attitude to it, then having an attitude presupposes, in this case, believing that certain conditions are fulfilled.

We ascribe the quality of "rudeness" to certain individuals who have done an action contrary to the accepted action in a particular scenario. For example, we often say, "It is rude to wear your hat or cap inside the house." It is possible to make such an ascription because of the belief that this action implies an unconventional behavior. Being unconventional implies a negative fact.

The second position in moral epistemology is moral non-cognitivism. Moral non-cognitvism purports that moral claims cannot be judged as true or false. This position implies that moral claims are not descriptions about the world; they are, rather, considered as evaluative judgments. This position supports Hume's Law. In effect, all moral anti-realists, except for moral skeptics, are non-cognitivists. But we must be wary of the different ways that they become non-cognitivists.

As we have discussed above, emotivism believes that moral judgments are mere expressions of emotions (or attitudes). Their non-cognitivism lies in the fact that expressions of emotions have no truth-values at all. The only value that we can get from them, according to psychological emotivism, is the appeal of these claims to our passions. We get to act according to a given moral claim not because of its reasonableness; rather, it is because of the commendatory force that it brings us when we follow them or the blameworthiness it brings if we don't. For example, to say "We ought to give to the poor" is to elicit a feeling from its hearers that would motivate them to act positively towards the poor. The same effect is made when we say, "Lying is wrong" since we then feel ashamed or guilty whenever we ourselves feel like doing such an action. It does goes to show that the commendatory force of moral claims, as emotivism tells us, is all that there is in them.

On the other hand, universal prescriptivism, as espoused by Hare, gives a different take on the matter. Moral claims, for universal prescriptivism, are not descriptions about the world; they are prescriptions of action that we desire to be applied universally. Hare (1963, 88) states this as follows:

> When we are trying, in a concrete case, to decide what we ought to do, what we are looking for…is an action to which we can commit ourselves

(prescriptivity) but which we are at the same time prepared to accept as exemplifying a principle of action to be prescribed by others in like circumstances (universalizability).

The prescriptive nature of moral claims shows that they are of the imperative form. That is, the sentential form "We ought to do X". Where X is whatever action we want to do. But our moral claims do not stop there; they must also be acceptable to everyone in like circumstances. This is a crucial point regarding our moral claims. Not all prescriptions have the same circumstances. A case might be given concerning lying. If it is to one's detriment not to lie, then it seems that the principle of lying will not hold to him or her. Of course in this case the prescription, "You ought not to lie" will not fit in such a circumstance. In this case, the agent of the action may or may not hold the prescription. However, given that the circumstances are not to one's detriment, then the prescription must hold. This is what universalizability is all about. For a moral claim to be accepted, the one that holds it must consider whether the circumstances that he or she is in fits the prescription, for if it does not, then no reasonable prescription would hold for him or her.

Moral Reasoning

We started our journey through the metaethical problems by asking whether there are moral facts, and then we further asked whether these are judged as true or false. But for some moral philosophers, notably Hare, Williams, Warnock, and Foot, these questions are peripheral to the main question of moral philosophy. They contend that what is at stake when we do moral philosophy is its applicability in answering difficult moral problems. To this end, we will devote this section to seek how metaethics could help resolve some of these problems.

Hume's law, as been pointed out above, is the culminating point of any inquiry in metaethics. The basic motivation behind Hume's law is the standard rules of reasoning. How can we arrive at a statement telling us what we ought to do from a set of statements about what is the case? There are two general positions that answer this problem; each has its pros and cons. The first is moral descriptivism. The second is moral non-descriptivism. We have already seen what moral descriptivism is committed to. We have, in effect, also seen what non-descriptivism is committed to in our discussions of universal prescriptivism. We shall focus on these two positions using one prominent philosopher as a representative for each position—Mrs. Foot will represent descriptivism, while Prof. Hare will represent universal prescriptivism. But before that, I think I need to explain why I only chose these two particular positions.

I chose these two positions because of four considerations: consistency, plausibility, applicability, and, for convenience sake, resolvability. I'll explain each consideration further. Both descriptivism and universal prescriptivism, as metaethical theories, are consistent in the arguments that they each presented. Consistency is a prerequisite for any theory in whatever field of investigation. The two make plausible explanations for moral talk. Although, it must be conceded that some other metaethical theories (excluding perhaps relativism and subjectivism) are consistent and plausible, they lack the third element: applicability. What I mean here is the theory's practical implications to reasoning about moral problems. And this element is missed by intuitionism, emotivism, and skepticism. But the last element reveals the reason for my choice; the two theories have the possibility of

being resolved into one strong theory of moral talk. And this is what I will be endeavoring to show here.

Let us go back to our problem in this section; viz. "Can we derive moral claims from factual claims?" Hare (1963, 86) claims that, in effect, we can have such derivation only if this derivation is not of entailment but of some other logical relation that applies only to moral claims. What does he mean by this? We cannot have a moral conclusion from solely factual claims if we were to follow the rules of standard logic. Let us clarify that; we can never have a categorical moral conclusion, i.e. a statement that simply asserts or denies whether something is ought to be done, using syllogistic rules. This leaves open the possibility of having such a conclusion only if we can also have a moral claim as a premise.

Consider this enthymeme argument: "What you're doing is stealing. Hence, you ought not to steal." As we can see here, in order to know the validity of this argument we need to see the hidden premise. This premise is, "You ought not to do something that is wrong; and stealing is wrong." The argument now, along with its hidden moral claim, can be seen as a reasonable and valid argument.

Foot (1958) complains against Hare's simplistic solution. She argues that although a moral argument could be made valid by assuming some moral premise it leaves one to understand the status of that moral premise. We can ask therefore whether the premise, "You ought not to do something that is wrong; and stealing is wrong," is really grounded on anything. Perhaps, Hare would argue that it is grounded on another moral premise. And this other moral premise is grounded on another moral premise *ad infinitum*. Foot (1958, 505) would answer that

> It can therefore be no reproach to anyone that he gives no reasons for a statement of moral principle, since any moral argument must contain some undefended premise of this kind.

This implies that we can never really have a reason for a moral claim without assuming other moral claims. This is what Foot repudiates.

What is needed, according to Foot, is to do away with Hume's law. She (ibid) argues:

> …it is laid down that some things do, and some things do not, count in favour of a moral conclusion, and that a man can no more decide for himself what is evidence for rightness and wrongness that he can decide what is evidence for monetary inflation or a tumor on the brain.

Some moral claims are, in effect, given evidence by non-moral claims. What does it mean to say that something gives evidence to something? It just means that in certain circumstances our moral claims hold; while in some others they do not. The circumstances will give credence to the moral claim, since if the moral claim is used in a circumstance that it is not compatible with it, then it seems to follow that the moral claim is not given evidence for. Foot (ibid.) summarizes this as:

> Anyone who uses moral terms at all, whether to assert or deny a moral proposition, must abide by the rules for their use, including the rules about what shall count as evidence for or against the moral judgment concerned.

I think that Hare's and Foot's positions can be reconciled. Foot accuses Hare of not seeing the circumstances that give evidence for moral claims. But, on the contrary, I think that Hare sees this. He (1963, 90) argues:

> No argument, however, starts from nothing. We must therefore ask what we have to have before moral arguments…The first requisite is that the facts of the case…Secondly we have the logical framework provided by the meaning of the word 'ought; (i.e. prescriptivity and universalizabilty…)…

Hare's analysis of the word 'ought' in moral claims paved the way for universal prescriptivism. But any moral claim should not be an empty mumbo jumbo. They must be rooted to the facts of everyday life in order for the word 'ought' to have its usual meaning.

Foot's complaint is against the adherence of Hare to Hume's law. But this I think is no longer is what is at stake. Hare admits that there can be no ought-statement from an is-statement, unless there is another ought. Anscombe and Searle admit that there are institutional facts that need to be considered. Foot also admits this and furthers that these circumstances (institutional facts) give evidence to our moral claims. All of them agree that we need to see the facts before we have any moral claim. But seeing the facts, as Hare goes one further, we need to see how we use the term 'ought' in our moral claims. By using his universal prescriptivism, along with the descriptivism's emphasis on facts, we can set moral claims and arguments that will benefit socio-political policy. It would also help resolve some problems in the distribution of goods. And I think this serves as a good model of our moral discourses.

Conclusion

We have gone through some interesting problems and positions as we went through the philosophical study of morality. This, along with results from philosophy of action, would make an exciting field that we need to focus our attention at in the future. I sincerely hope that I have introduced well the main problems of metaethics, and I also hope that the main topics here will serve as an invitation to engage in a philosophical inquiry of our moral talk.

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Questions and Activities for Reflection

1. Create a conceptual map of metaethics. The three problems will serve as your starting points.
2. Use G. E. Moore's Open Question Argument in analyzing the definition of the good as what my culture dictates to me. Show also that this definition leads to the naturalistic fallacy.
3. Evaluate the reasonableness of the resolution made for universal prescriptivism and descriptivism. Give your reasons.